

God's Providential Care
Romans 8:28
Pastor John Miller

Romans 8:28-30 is going to be the subject of the next two Sundays, but today we're going to focus just on verse 28. But I'm going to read verses 28-30 as a unit.

Paul says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified."

Anyone who knows the Bible knows that Romans 8:28 is one of the all-time great verses of Scripture. It has been called the "soft pillow" for the saints to rest their weary head upon. I agree with that. When you're going through a time of suffering or sorrow or trouble or tribulation or adversity, you can always turn to the promise of Romans 8:28, and you can read that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

As God's children, we not only have a new hope and a new help that comes to us from the Holy Spirit, but we also have a new knowledge. Notice it in verse 28: "And we know...." What do we know? We know, in verse 18, that we're going through times of suffering that will lead to glory. But in this present suffering, we can also know something. We can rest assured of something. We can know that God is working for our good and for His glory.

There is a parallel passage to Romans 8:28 that you are familiar with, as well. In Philippians 1:6, Paul says, "...being confident..."—in Philippians 1:6, it's "and we know" or "we're sure"—"...of this very thing, that He which has begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

Have you ever started a job and not finished it? Something happened to me when I was a teenager. I promised my dear mother that I would paint the house. I got the house half painted and never finished it. It still bothers me to this day. I should go back there and finish painting it, even though she's been in heaven for twenty years. So when I get to heaven I'll say, "Mom, I'm sorry I didn't finish that job."

You may read a book and you don't finish it, or you join the gym and you're going to go every day, but you only go once. And that was three years ago that you joined the gym. You say, "I'm a member of the gym," but you've never been there. A lot of jobs you start, but you don't finish.

Aren't you glad that God isn't like us? I am. God doesn't get tired of working in our lives. He doesn't say, "This John Miller is getting boring. I'm going to put him on the shelf and go to someone else. I'm going to give up on him." But once God starts a work in our lives, God

continues that work in our lives.

It was the great theologian Jonathan Edwards who made a statement that I love. He said, "What begins with grace ends in glory." In other words, when God, in His grace, begins a work in your life, it is a sure thing that you will end in glory. It's a process that God starts, and we're going to see that over the next several weeks at the end of Romans 8. So "having this confidence that what God starts in you, He will perform it and complete it until the day of Jesus Christ when He returns."

I want us to look together at verse 28 and discover five facts about God's providential care. What do I mean by "providential care"? The word "providence" means "God superintended," "God watching over," "God providing," "God caring," "God leading us," "God guiding us" or "God protecting us." So it means God's supernatural, sovereign protection, provision and care of our lives.

The first fact is that we have the certainty of God's providential care. Verse 28 says, "And we know..." This is the certainty. This is what I call the believer's blessed assurance. It's interesting that earlier Paul said in verse 26 that there is something we don't know. We don't know how to pray or what we should pray for, so the Holy Spirit helps in our weaknesses. We go from verse 26, "We do not know what we should pray for" to verse 28, "And we know..." So there are things we don't know, and there are things we do know.

From time to time, people say, "Pastor Miller, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." Then they ask me a question, and I have to say, "I don't know." They looked shocked.

"Well, aren't you a pastor? Don't you get paid for answering deep, theological questions? Don't you have a red phone on your desk, and you just call God directly and get an answer to my problem?"

No. There is a lot we don't know. In the Christian life, there are things that God has chosen, in His wisdom, not to reveal to us. The Bible says, "The hidden things belong to the Lord." So there are things that we won't know until we get to heaven and we see things clearly.

But thank God, there are things that we do know. It's interesting that when Jesus was trying to wash Peter's feet in John 13, Peter rejected that and said, "Lord, You're not going to wash my feet." Then Jesus said, "Peter, what I'm doing right now, you don't understand, but you'll know afterwards."

I thought, How fitting! There is so much that God is doing right now in my life and in your life that you don't understand. You don't understand why that loss, or why that bereavement or why that heartache or why that sickness or why that job loss or why that child is rebellious. But you will know hereafter; God has a plan, and we must rest in that.

So we must "know." We know, but how do we know? We know by faith. So my answer to "How

do we know” is “by faith.” Did you notice that it doesn’t say, “And we see that all things work together for good”? It doesn’t say, “And we feel that all things work together for good.” Many times we don’t see and we don’t feel. “I don’t feel God’s presence. I don’t see God working.”

Someone said, “Many times the child of light must walk in darkness.” But when you walk in the darkness, never doubt what God spoke in the light. When you can’t see, when you can’t feel and you don’t understand, you rest in what you do understand: that “all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” So your focus needs to be on God.

By the way, in our translation of the passage, it doesn’t insert the word “God” there, but some manuscripts include that, and we know that God worketh all things to them who love Him and are called according to His purpose. And even if it isn’t in the text, it is inferred that it is God who is the one who is working. So our focus in our trials and troubles needs to be on God.

I recommend three areas that you should focus on: God’s person, God’s promises and God’s power. When you’re walking through a dark time, a difficult time, or you’re going through adversity and suffered a loss and you don’t know what’s going on, rest on God’s person. He is a God of grace, of love, of mercy, of kindness. He is good all the time. We can rest on that. He knows all things. He is everywhere present. So we can rest on His person.

We can also rest on His promises. God has given us “exceeding great and precious promises” in His Word. Discover the promises of God, claim them for your own, fulfill the requirements in order to claim them and then live out His promises.

Sometimes we make a promise, but we can’t keep it, because we didn’t know the weather was going to turn bad. We didn’t know the economy was going to turn bad. We didn’t know the car was going to break down. We didn’t know someone was going to get sick. So we can’t do what we promised we would do. But God does.

Rely on God’s power. Do you know that nothing’s outside of God’s power? That nothing can thwart His purposes because of His power? God keeps His promises. What He has spoken cannot be broken. So the certainty of His care means we can know something. You’re going to go through life not knowing a lot. But don’t be discouraged, because there are things we can know. “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

Someone put this in a poem:

“I know not where His islands lift

Their fronded palms in air;

I only know I cannot drift

Beyond His love and care.”

I love that. So there is a lot I don’t know, but I do know that “I cannot drift beyond His love and care.”

Notice the second fact about God’s providential care, in verse 28, is the fact of the extent of His care. The extent of His care is to “all things.” The words “all things” in the Greek means “all things.” In other words, no qualifications or limits. You ask, “Even bad things?” Yes, even bad things. You have to ask, “What is a bad thing? What is a good thing?” What we call “bad,” might actually be good, and what we call “good,” might actually be a bad thing. Let’s let God determine what is bad and what is good. So every event of our lives is included in “all things.” Good or bad is under His loving, beneficent, sovereign control. This would include, verses 17 and 18, “sufferings of this present time”; it would include, verse 23, our groanings; and it would also include our disappointments, our bereavements, our illnesses, children who cause great pain, loss of wealth, loss of health and lack of fruit in Christian service.

It’s interesting that Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:26, said that when you’re discouraged or going through hard times, become a bird watcher. He didn’t say it in that way, but He said, “Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them.”

I remember I was going through a difficult time many years ago, it was a rainy day and I looked out on the front porch. Huddled under the porch was a little sparrow that had a big, giant French fry in its beak. I think French fries were created by God for birds. That’s not fair; I have to buy French fries, but the birds get them for free. They just cruise down to their local fast-food place and scoop one up. The thing was bigger than the bird. He’s got this big French fry in his beak. Then I reminded myself of Jesus’ words: “God My Father feeds the birds. Are you not of more value than they?” “Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from your Father knowing about it.” God attends the funeral of every sparrow. And you’re of more value than many birds.

Then Jesus said in Matthew 6:28-30: “Consider the lilies of the field...They neither toil nor spin....Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” These flowers are here for one day and then are thrown into the oven. They used them for fuel in their ovens. “Now if God clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?” The answer is, “Yes.”

So if you get discouraged, go out and study the birds and look at the flowers and remind yourself that you have a Father in heaven who cares for you. What a marvelous thing that is.

We have, first of all, the certainty, and we know. Secondly, we have the extent—“all things,” good and bad. Then thirdly, we have the fact that we have the harmony of His care in verse 28 —“Work together.” Every phrase in this verse is packed with truth. “And we know that all things work together”—not individually, but “together.” God, who is working, is working things together. It’s the harmony. William Barclay translates this verse: “We know that God is

intermingling all things for our good for them that love Him.”

In themselves, these things may not seem good. You may say, “Someone died. That’s not good.” Or they may say, “Someone got cancer. That’s not good.” Or, “Someone went through a divorce. That’s not good.” But God actually brings them all together, and He works to harmonize them to use them for our good and for His glory.

I like the illustration of baking a cake. I don’t bake cakes; I like to eat cakes. I don’t know all the ingredients that go into a cake, but I’ve watched my wife and my mom. They make a cake from scratch by putting in flour, sugar, eggs and stir it all up. They put some other stuff in there too. Anyway, you put in all the ingredients, you put it in the oven and bake it and out comes a beautiful cake.

I must admit that if it’s baked, I love it. My weakness is baked goods. Praise God! I can smell or spot a bakery a thousand miles away. I love baked goods. Anytime I go in the store and see baked goods, I need to go the other way, because I love that stuff.

If you took the ingredients of a cake and tried to eat them raw, individually—raw eggs, sugar, flour—it would be terrible. But when you mix the ingredients together in a bowl and then put the cake in the oven, it comes out a beautiful cake, which tastes good.

What God does—it’s a beautiful picture; God takes the hurts and the pains and the joys, the ups and the downs, the mountains and the valleys and mixes them all together and puts us in the oven. He’s working to bring them together for His glory—to make something beautiful out of your life.

God is working continuously, God is working purposefully and God is working lovingly. Don’t forget that. God doesn’t stop working. God has a purpose in His working. God is loving in His working all things.

Then notice, fourthly, the result of His providential care is “for good.” “And we know that all things work together for good.” God is working for our good and for His glory. What is the “good” that God is working in my life? God is working to make you, make me, make us like Jesus.

Remember that we have three aspects to our salvation? Past, present and future? We have been—past tense—justified. We have been declared righteous. We are being—present tense—sanctified, or being made righteous. Then one day, we will be glorified and made perfectly righteous in the presence of the Lord.

So we are in the middle of that now; we are in the present tense. We, as Christians, have been forgiven, we will be glorified, but right now we’re being sanctified. One of the chief means by which God sanctifies you is by suffering, trials and hardships. The reason is that He’s trying to cut away things in your life to make you more like Jesus. The goal of sanctification is Christ-likeness. That is what God is trying to do in your heart and in your life.

We'll get it next Sunday, but look, starting at verse 29. "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son." There it is: God chose you, He determined what to do with you and He's conforming you into the image of His Son. Why? "... that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified." It's a golden chain that cannot be broken. Whom God saves, He will glorify. What begins in grace will end in glory.

Now you must take Romans 8:28 in its context. Everybody knows it and everybody quotes it, but they don't remember verses 29-30. What is the good work that God is trying to do in my life? The good that He is doing is that He is trying to make me more like Jesus. I've heard this verse used for the situation that if my car breaks, I'm going to get a better one. If I lose my job, "All things work together for good," so that means I'll get a better job. That's not what this verse is teaching.

You say, "Really, Pastor Miller? You're going to tell me that?"

"Yes; I have to be honest with you. You might have to ride your bike to work for a while. God bless you."

Maybe God wants to humble you, or God wants to teach you something. Maybe God wants you to spend more time in prayer. I don't know. But I do know that God works all things together for your good and for His glory. It doesn't mean that something good is going to happen right now. It means that God is trying to make you like Jesus Christ.

I love what Oswald Sanders said. He said, "Every adverse experience, when rightly received..."—that's the key—"...can carry its quota of good. Bodily pain and weakness cause us to feel our frailty. Perplexity reveals our lack of wisdom. Financial reverses point out how limited our resources are. Mistakes and failures humble our pride. All these can be included in the term 'good.'" Amen and amen. Oh that we would look with that perspective: that God wants to make you into the image of His Son.

One of my favorite illustrations of this—I use it quite often—is 2 Corinthians 12, Paul's thorn in the flesh. You can't get better than that for an example. The great Paul the apostle had a thorn in his flesh, a "messenger of Satan to buffet" him. He prayed three times and asked God to take it away, but God said "No" all three times.

In the context, we understand what's going on. Paul had been lifted up to heaven. He saw visions and revelations. He understood things that no one else saw or heard. He came back to earth and said that "It would be a crime for me to utter what I saw." Then he said, "Because of the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me..."—take note of that and who gave it to him—"...a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure."

So there you have it: because of the blessings that God gave to Paul, God had to give him

some burdens. Because of the paradise experience, God had to give him a painful experience. God knows how to balance our lives. God constantly comes to me and reminds me that the infirmity and weakness in my flesh and the frailty of my life is given by God as a gift to keep me humble and to keep me dependent upon Him. When we pray, "Take it away," God says, "No; my grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in your weakness."

When Paul heard those words, he said, "God's not going to take away this thorn. But He's going to give me His grace to bear my infirmities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. So most gladly I'll glory in my weakness, for then the power of God will rest upon me." What an example of how God let sorrow and suffering and weakness come into our lives to keep us humble and useable, to teach us that we need Him every hour.

I don't know what you might be going through right now, but learn your lessons well. Everything that happens to you—if you respond properly—God will use it for your good and for His glory.

Fifthly and lastly, notice in verse 28 the objects of His providential care. It is seen in the statement, "...to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Now the text does not say, "All things work for good," period. Some people say that. You hear unbelievers quoting this, but they don't quote it properly. They just say, "All things work together for good." Do you hear people say that? "Oh, everything works together for good." No, it does not.

There are two things that qualify to whom things work for good: those who love God, and those who are called according to His purpose. I believe this is a reference to Christians. It could be referring to Christians who have a special love for God, but I think it means in a general sense to all Christians—although we are all to love God—and it also refers to all Christians who are called according to His purpose. We need to be men and women who love God.

In Deuteronomy 6:5, it says, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength." That's the most important thing you could ever do. If you would just make the focus of your life loving God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, God will take care of you. And if you love your neighbor as yourself, God will take care of you. We love Him because He first loved us.

The second qualification is that they are "the called according to His purpose." Our part is to love God. God's part is that He called us in eternity past. This is the sovereignty of God. So you have man's part—loving God—and you have God's part—choosing those who will be saved. We will look more into that in depth next time. But God calls us by His love and His grace, and we read that in verses 29-30.

Do you know that you would not be a Christian if it were not for the love and grace of God? Do you know that God didn't choose you because you're intelligent? Because you're good looking? Because you're charismatic? Because you're smart? Because you have talent? God didn't say, "I really need them on my team." The Bible says that God "has chosen the foolish

things of the world to put to shame the wise...the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are mighty, and the base things of the world...and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence." So if you were chosen by God, you are a candidate for His glory—the foolish thing, the weak thing, the base thing, the despised thing. We were lost and living in darkness, but God, by His grace, came and rescued us.

So we know—I love that—the certainty of His assurance. How do we know? Because God has promised in His Word. And God's Word cannot be broken.

There are a lot of examples of things working "together for good to those who love God." I think of the Old Testament story of Jacob. Joseph was gone, Reuben was disgraced, Judah was dishonored, Simeon and Levi had broken his heart, Dinah was defiled, Simeon was now in prison, his beloved Rachael was dead, famine threatened the family, then came the demand from Egypt that the young Benjamin must also appear before the governor before future supplies would be released.

Jacob began to cry, and he said in Genesis 42:36, "You have bereaved me: Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin. All these things are against me." I love that statement of Jacob. I chuckle at that because of what's in the next chapter. "Jacob, read the next chapter! I know your story. Hang in there, buddy! Don't freak out! Just turn the page of your life! You're gonna go to Egypt. You're gonna see Joseph again. He's gonna be there. Your kids are gonna be there. God's gonna provide!" "All these things are against me," he cried, but little did he know, from his perspective, that all these things were working together by God for his good—and for our good.

The second example would go from Jacob to Joseph. Don't you love the story of Joseph? Chosen, special son, got his father's coat, hated by his brothers, sold as a slave in Egypt. You talk about having a bad day! Imagine Joseph in a group-therapy session.

"Joseph, what's your problem?"

"Man, all my brothers hated me, they threw me in a pit, they sold me as a slave to Egypt, I got there and this woman got eyes for me, I did the right thing and resisted her, then she lied about me and I got thrown in prison. I'm rottin' in this prison!" But during all this, Joseph never forgot God. You know, in the story of Joseph, just about every time you read in the narrative where Joseph is speaking, he mentions God. God was the center of his life. Then finally when Joseph is released after all these years of suffering and he is sitting second to Pharaoh on the throne, all his brothers were brought before him. You could think, "Man, he's really going to take vengeance on them now!" But Joseph said, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." Isn't that amazing? He looked at his brothers with tears running down his face and said, "You meant it for evil, but God turned it around and made it good." He saved many lives. God had a purpose and God had a plan.

The ultimate picture is that of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was crucified on a cruel cross, rejected by men. What could be worse than sinful men crucifying the Son of God? God came down from heaven, born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, raised the dead, fed the hungry—did all of these miracles—and we took Him and nailed Him to a cruel cross. That's bad. The Crucifixion is man at his worst but God at His best; love conquered hate, goodness conquered anger. We see that Jesus was buried, but three days later, He rose from the dead. So God took this horrible situation—the Cross of Jesus Christ—He put our sins on Jesus, He atoned for our sins and then Jesus rose from the dead. The Cross ever stands as a picture of God working “all things together for good to those who love God.”

Some of you have read the book *The Hiding Place* by Corrie ten Boom. If you haven't, you should read it. It's a marvelous, true story of the ten Boom family in Holland during World War II. They made a hiding place in their home and hid Jews from the Nazis. Eventually they were discovered, and Corrie's father and her sister, Betsy, were hauled off to prison. Corrie's father and sister died, and Corrie suffered in Ravensbruck Concentration Camp for many years. The ten Booms were children of God. They loved God. Finally, God released Corrie from that prison, and she travel the world telling others about the goodness and mercy of God. Whenever she would speak, she would hold up a bookmark on the underside with all these strings and all the cloth and showed that you couldn't really read what it said; it made no sense on the underside. Then she would turn that bookmark over on the upper side and on that side was embroidered, “God is love.”

She would remind people, as we should be reminded, that we're looking from the underside. All we see are a bunch of haphazard threads, dark and light, that make no sense, and we don't know what God is doing. One day we'll look from the upper side. We'll understand that God is love.

Someone put it in a poem called *The Divine Weaver*:

“My life is but a weaving between my God and me.

I do not choose the colors He worketh steadily.

Ofttimes He weaveth sorrow, and I in foolish pride,

Forget He sees the upper, and I the underside.

Not 'till the loom is silent, and the shuttle ceases to fly,

Will God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful in the skillful Weaver's hand

As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned.”

Let's pray.